

THE COWBOY IS STILL KING AT HISTORIC STOCKYARDS

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FORT WORTH - Smack in the middle of an ocean of north Texas prairie grass, a lone fort was established to protect settlers from Indian attacks. The year was 1849, just 13 years after Texans wrested independence from Mexico, with the rallying cry "Remember the Alamo!" still ringing in their ears.

Gallop forward 154 years, and the little fort has evolved into a city a half-million strong called Fort Worth.

In the historic Stockyards District, also known as Cowtown, restaurants and shops occupy stalls where scores of cattle once awaited their fate during the heyday of the cattle industry from the 1870s to about 1940. Seven acres of stalls, barns, and offices have been restored, and the herds that now wander the streets are tourists instead of longhorn cattle.

Still, there is much an old cowhand would recognize in this section of town, and not just in the saloons, cattle chutes, and haberdasheries that line the cobbled streets. He would see it in the tilt of the cowboy hat, the spring-loaded jaunt, and the mixture of hard-fisted justice and Victorian propriety, the "cowboy code" that many here still hold to fiercely.

The only cowboys most of us see are those concocted by Hollywood. In many ways, the image of the Hollywood cowboy is as flimsy as the celluloid it comes on. But in many other ways it's alive and whooping it up here at the Stockyards.

In Cowtown Coliseum's twice-weekly rodeo, Jason Griffin prepares for the bareback riding event. He's as skinny as a fence rail, and his jeans hang on his frame with the help of a short length of rope. At 6 feet 6 inches, he towers over most of the riders.

"I have long legs so I can wrap 'em around 'im and hold on," he says. His hat is bent up in back. "That's so when I lean way back it won't hit the horse."

One after another, animals and riders roar out of the chutes in a chaos of twisting tonnage, raking spurs, and flying bodies.

Bull rider Mitchell Polk taps his chest. "If you want to be a cowboy, it's gotta be right here," he says. "Cowboyin' is something that's put there when you're born. You've got to want to be the best." He should know: Since he began competing at age 11 he's won four rodeo belt buckles, which champions wear with the pride of a prizefighter.

Team calf roper Jillyan Webb says she lied about her age to get into Pee Wee barrel racing. By 14, she was No. 1 in her home state of Alaska. She moved to Texas for tougher competition. "So many people here were born and raised with a rope in their hands. It's a lifestyle here."

The purveyors of that lifestyle keep the locals outfitted in the elemental boots, hats, starched shirts, and creased jeans that have been worn since the streets ran with rivers of mud and cattle.

"We make boots for the guy who gets up, puts 'em on, and won't take 'em off till he goes back to bed," says Gene Lee Reynolds, who has been sizing men and women for custom-made cowboy boots at Leddy's Western Wear for 12 years. Leddy's has been around for about 70 years.

He traces the feet of his clientele in leather-bound ledgers and neatly inscribes a detailed accounting of foot characteristics, design preferences, and riding practice. One volume includes Billy Joel, Dwight Yoakam, Trisha Yearwood, and Nolan Ryan (who, for the record, has enormous feet).

An endurance rider is deciding against a wide welt (or stitching platform where the sole meets the upper) because, "I don't need another place to catch all the mud we got in Oregon." He chooses a deep, V-shaped cut from the boot top to accommodate his calves, which bulk up when his riding season intensifies. He chooses kangaroo leather over more exotic and expensive elephant, stingray, alligator, or snakeskin.

"It's going to keep me up all night just worrying if I got the details right," the rider muses - and with just cause; a pair of Leddy's custom-made boots starts at \$500 and can run into the thousands.

Selecting a cowboy hat is an equally important part of the outfitting process.

"You can tell a lot about a person by their hat," says salesman Jon Magill, who wears one made of felted beaver fur. "We live in them. Texans usually wear them with a slight tilt, creased and bent to a flat, crisp shape."

Larry Morgan, who shapes the hats, shows the fine points of a \$3,000 black beaver hat. The crown gives a pop when he pinches it, and it feels smooth, soft, and sturdy. Highly prized beaver fur used in the most expensive hats is cut only every four years.

Whether they're made of beaver fur or palm leaf - what we think of as straw hats - they all start with a rounded crown. Morgan coaxes the desired shape by hand, using steam to soften the material and encourage the shape to set.

"Most cowboys like to look crisp," says Magill. "They'll wear a 'wild rag,' or silk scarf, around their neck; a nice, starched shirt; a cleanly creased hat; and starched jeans. I have jeans that will fray down the creases from being starched so much before they'll wear out anywhere else. And the rodeo belt buckle," he adds with a touch of reverence, "when you're wearing one of those, people know this is something you have competed for in a rodeo and proven you're the best."

Back outside, one of two daily longhorn cattle drives move down Exchange Avenue. A handful of riders guide the small herd.

A mechanical bull across from the Visitor Center lures a small crowd. Ten-year-old Gary Barnes from Florida clings like a burr for the entire ride. It's hard to resist giving it a go - and to resist

using the bull's horns as foot pegs for extra stability as you feel that inevitable slide, even after pleading with the operator to go easy. The embarrassing thing is that he does go easy, but most people still take flight after just a few turns.

When asked his secret for staying on so long, a wide-eyed Barnes imparts advice honed on the anvil of experience: "Hold on!"

After a humiliating spin on the bull, some of the finest barbecued pork ribs at the Booger Red Saloon and Hunter Brothers Restaurant work wonders to remove the bitter taste of defeat. Two little girls climb onto bar stools topped with small leather saddles. Their families crowd around a table and laugh about the day's adventures: a tour through the Cowboy Hall of Fame, a ride on an antique steam train, a cowboy who picked the girls up and plunked them on the back of a mountainous longhorn steer, and the purchase of two pairs of red leather cowgirl boots.

IF YOU GO... HOW TO GET THERE LOWEST UPCOMING ROUND-TRIP AIR FARE BETWEEN BOSTON AND DALLAS/FORT WORTH AVAILABLE AT PRESS TIME STARTED AT \$221 ON MIDWEST EXPRESS, CONNECTING THROUGH MILWAUKEE. FOR DIRECT FLIGHTS, FARES STARTED AT \$241 ON AMERICAN AIRLINES AND \$267 ON DELTA. FORT WORTH IS 20 MILES (ABOUT 45 MINUTES) FROM THE AIRPORT. A mixture of AAA and SmarterLiving.com discounts landed a rental car from Hertz (upgraded to a sweet Mustang) for under \$90 for the week, reserved at the airport (www.dfwairport.com).

What to do

Cowtown Coliseum

121 E. Exchange Ave.

1-888-COWTOWN www.cowtowncoliseum.com Home of the first indoor rodeo, and where Elvis once played for the not-so-Kingly sum of \$50, now offers rodeo Friday and Saturday nights.

Stockyards Station

130 E. Exchange Ave.

817-625-9715

www.stockyardsstation.com The old hog and sheep pens now serve as restaurants, galleries, gift shops, and train depot. The Tarantula Excursion Train, a restored 1896 steam engine that pulls six antique passenger cars, departs at 1 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday for a one-hour ride to 8th Avenue. The Visitor Center is the best spot to view the daily cattle drives, held at 11:30 a.m. and 4 p.m.

M. L. Leddy's Western Wear

2455 N. Main St.

817-624-3149

One of the oldest, most respected names in handmade boots and saddles in Texas. They've been at it since 1922.

Billy Bob's Texas

2520 Rodeo Plaza

817-624-7117

www.billybobstexas.com

Dance, shop, or gaze at the cement wall of fame, where the most popular performers' handprints bear the lipstick of their more enthusiastic fans. Admission: Sunday and Monday, \$1 before 7 p.m., \$3 after 7 p.m.; Tuesday-Thursday, \$1 before 8 p.m., \$4 after 8 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, \$1 before 5 p.m. (closed 5-6 p.m.), \$6.50 after 6 p.m., depending on performer. Live bull riding Friday and Saturday at 9 and 10 p.m., \$2.50.

Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame

128 E. Exchange Ave.

817-626-7131

www.texascowboyhalloffame.com Honoring cowboys and cowgirls who have excelled. Also features about 60 antique wagons, carriages, and sleighs. Admission: adults \$4; seniors \$3; children (3-12) \$2.

Where to eat

H3 Ranch and Booger Red's Saloon

109 E. Exchange Ave.

817-624-1246

www.h3ranch.com If pig and chicken spit-roasted over an open hickory fire and dipped in Nine Miles of Dirt Road sauce isn't heavenly enough, then the H3 Jack Daniel's ice cream with a brownie and chocolate sauce will hogtie your appetite for days. Entrees \$16- \$35.

Where to stay

Miss Molly's B & B

109 1/2 W. Exchange Ave.

1-800-99-MOLLY www.missmollys.com Once a prim and proper boarding house, then a bordello, now a sweet spot in the middle of the Stockyards to rest your weary bones. Seven rooms share old-fashioned bathrooms. The eighth, Miss Josie's Madame's Quarters, is appointed with elegant, Victorian decor and a private bath. Rooms \$125-\$200.

Stockyards Hotel

109 E. Exchange Ave.

1-800-423-8471

www.stockyardshotel.com Since 1897, it has catered to wealthy cattlemen, infamous outlaws (ask to see the Bonnie & Clyde room), and tourists, rodeo competitors, and modern-day cattle traders. A fine mix of rustic and Victorian elegance. Choose among the Victorian, Mountain Man, Cowboy, and Native American-themed rooms. Rooms \$169-\$375.